

WHAT IS HAPPENING WITH TRUST?

JUAN NARBONA

Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, Rome

Year after year, surveys measuring the level of social trust towards the main public institutions show predominantly negative data. Statistics from Ipsos (2019), Edelman (2021) or Gallup (2020) place governments, banks and multinational companies among the least valued organizations, while the military, the scientific community or small businessmen maintain their credibility.

When surveys take religious organizations into consideration, they accompany the other institutions in a downward trend. For example, a study published by Edelman in 2021 claims that only 42% of the global population trusts religious leaders. Only politicians, with 41%, scored worse; on the other hand, executives and even journalists, with 45% and 48%, respectively, enjoyed greater support.

Those of us who are dedicated to the institutional communication of the Church cannot look the other way if, roughly speaking more than half of the population declares its detachment from entities that for centuries have been the backbone of society. Our job is to establish quality relationships with the different stakeholders, but if trust is lacking, occasions for friction and disagreements will arise. We need trust to communicate, as we need oxygen to breathe, because the absence of trust cancels out any communication proposal.

For the Church, trust is a key value. Her primary mission is to transmit a message of salvation; however, the unanimity of this promise and the expectation it generates among the faithful contrasts, at times, with her difficulty in orienting and accompanying people, who come to her aware

of their personal fragility. We trust in God, but we are not always so sure that we can trust in the Church.

For many years now, there has been an academic debate about the reasons for the general decline of trust in institutions. Are the media to blame? Is the Internet changing the criteria for the attribution of authority? Can we communicators do something to restore trust in our organizations?

In this session, I first intend to reflect on the concept of *trust* from a theoretical point of view. Then, I will expose some possible reasons for its deterioration. Finally, I will suggest some challenges for communicators, suggestions that, I am sure, my colleagues will explore in greater depth and at greater length, today and in the next five meetings.

1. WHAT IS TRUST?

So, what is “trust”? In English, the term comes from the Old Norse *traust*, which in turn goes back to the Proto-Indo-European *deru* to mean “to be firm, hard, solid”¹. Indeed, when we trust we expect someone’s or something’s intention to remain firm without being certain that it will. Therefore, trust has been defined as “a confident relationship with the unknown” (Botsman 2017).

Trust implies taking a leap into the void in the hope that the future behavior of the other party will be consistent with the expectations generated. It implies, therefore, accepting a risk that makes us vulnerable and doing so *freely*² (in this

¹ In Latin-rooted languages, the original word reflects a similar idea. Words like “fiducia” (in Italian) or “confianza” (in Spanish) come from the Latin *-fides-*, which is inspired by the Greek term *pistis* (faith), which in turn goes back to the Sanskrit term *fid*, meaning “to bind”. Indeed, when we trust we expect that someone will remain bound to the word given or to a promise.

² Here are two of the most widely cited definitions in the scientific literature: “Trust is a psychological state of acceptance of vulnerability based on positive expectations of the intentions or behaviors of another”, Cf. Rousseau, D. et al. (1998). “Not so different after all: A cross-discipline view of trust”. *Academy of Management Review*, 23, 393–404. A second definition of trust is: “A relationship between two parties that is interpersonal and bidirectional in nature, where the trusting party freely chooses to make itself vulnerable to an action by the party to be trusted”, Cf. Mayer, R. C. et al. (1995). *Op. Cit.*, 709–734. Both definitions emphasize two elements: the vulnerability of the trusting subject and the expectation generated by the one requesting trust.

sense, expressions such as “building” or “manufacturing” trust are erroneous, because they insinuate the possibility of a certain control over an attribute that can only be granted in freedom, not automatically or by magic formula).

When it encourages us to accept a risk, trust helps us to make decisions, streamlines relationships, speeds up processes and facilitates collaboration. Likewise, when we receive trust, we feel more responsible and our identification with a project increases (how important is trust between people working in the same department!) Without it, suspicions, fear, insecurities, jealousy, paralysis... arise. In fact, we could not live without trust because - as the English philosopher Onora O’Neill (2002) says - there always comes a time “when we need to put ourselves in the hands of others and expect them to meet our expectations”.

1.1. Components of trustworthiness: Trust Signals

As we have said, trust is a good that is granted. Trustworthiness, on the other hand, is the ability to inspire trust, an ability that individuals or institutions can acquire and transmit. Drawing on Aristotle’s rhetoric³, it has traditionally been claimed that this ability can be obtained by cultivating three elements, which we can call *Trust Signals*. We can imagine them as the three blades of a propeller that move an organization forward, slowly at first, but faster and faster because trustworthiness is progressive.

The first and most important element is *integrity* or *coherence*, that is to say, fidelity to one’s own identity, which comes to life in daily activity. Integrity makes it possible to predict the behavior of the person or institution, particularly in turbulent times, when prudence and judgment are required; times when it may be difficult to distinguish the right

³ They are inspired by the components of persuasive discourse -logos, ethos and pathos- proposed by Aristotle (1992. *The Art of Rhetoric*. Penguin Classic). On this proposal, Cf. Guillén, M. et al. (2011). “Rethinking trust as a critical factor in the organizational behaviour”. *Cuadernos de Gestión*, 11, 33-48.

decision from the wrong one⁴. The great ally of integrity is *consistency*, because it demonstrates that our values stand the test of time or circumstance. When, for example, the Church is faithful to charity-her deepest identity-and puts service to people and fidelity to doctrine before her own good name or popularity, she is demonstrating integrity.

The second element to arouse trustworthiness is *competence* or *ability*: the possession of the knowledge, skills and abilities that enable someone to perform a given function (Mayer et al. 1995). The ally of competence is *professionalism*.

The third and final ingredient is *benevolence*, that is, desiring the good of the other party. If the one who is expected to trust does not perceive this benevolence, he or she will fear that the hidden intentions of the other party will collide with his or her own. The ally of benevolence is the *transparency offered*, which helps to show the authenticity of good intentions (on the other hand, when transparency is *requested* or *demand*ed, it is a demonstration of distrust).

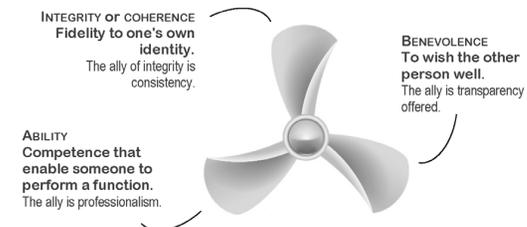


Fig. 1 The three blades of the propeller of trustworthiness

Almost without realizing it, each of us evaluates these three elements before placing our trust in something or

⁴ Whoever is coherent can trust himself and becomes trustworthy in the eyes of others. Much has been written about trustworthiness as a virtue. Hawley, for example, says that “trustworthiness resembles a moral virtue, it is part of being a good person” (Cf. Hawley, K. 2019. *Trust: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Kindle position 184). On his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle said that the virtuous person is more trustworthy, because he possesses his own resources not to betray, not to lie, to be constant, prudent, etc. Inspiring trust is, therefore, the result of a way of being, a “virtue” or stable trait of the good subject.

someone. For example, Antonello, the mechanic to whom I take my car to repair the damage caused by the many potholes in Rome, is passionate about cars. Watching his passion I understand that he identifies himself with his work. He is also competent, and he proves it to me when he immediately discovers the reason for a small noise or a leaking pipe; and finally, he is benevolent, so he wants our mutual benefit, because he has a price list in sight and gives me an invoice every time I pay him.

In the last part of my presentation we will see what we communicators can do to cultivate these three allies in our organizations.

2. REASONS FOR THE CRISIS: TRUST POTHoles

Now that we know more about how trust is inspired, we can ask ourselves: why is this value going through a long crisis in the institutional sphere? Onora O'Neill (2002), among others, has pointed out that the main reason is the current culture of suspicion, a stifling environment in which trust flows more slowly, even paralyzing relationships.

This culture of suspicion has come about as a result of the combination of two factors, one external to the organizations and the other internal. The first is attributable to the current contaminated media context. The second, to the recent loss of reputation of some relevant institutions, which has provoked a generalized suspicion towards these forms of social organization (Bacharach & Gambetta 2001). We can call these two factors *Trust Potholes*, because they sink or destabilize our relationships, like potholes on the road. Let's start with the first one:

2.1. Contaminated communicative context

In the context of the digital revolution, the polarization of opinions, the creation of ideological bubbles, Echo Chambers, information overload and fake news have un-

doubtedly contributed to contaminate the information ecosystem, feeding fear, indignation and populism, breeding grounds of distrust (Nichols 2017). Digital media have favored a tribalism that promotes suspicion towards the unknown and foreign⁵. Trust, on the other hand, requires closeness, interaction, time and a certain intimacy. As Benedict XVI said, the Internet, by putting us in close contact with strangers, is paradoxically distancing us from them.

It is also important to consider that, public debate moves at a frenetic speed at the pace of *tweets* or *stories*, thus prioritizing the power of emotions and decisions made only with the heart, without room for reasoning, feeding the obligation to take extreme and distant positions (anti-pro, left-right, remain-stay, for-against), making it impossible to communicate the kindness introduced by nuances.

In this confusing panorama - already weakened by the ideological relativism of the 20th century - recognizing the truth has become a secondary element, because the fear of being manipulated is greater. Aware of our fragility⁶, we have replaced universal moral principles with subjective and personal pragmatic values.

Curiously, in a historical epoch that has exalted reason, renouncing faith as a possible way of knowledge, public

⁵ As Pope Francis points out, we are in the perspective of an epochal change, inasmuch as "broad swathes of humanity are immersed in it in an ordinary and continuous way. It is no longer just a matter of using instruments of communication, but of living in a largely digitalized culture, which profoundly affects the notion of time and space, the perception of oneself, of others and of the world, the way of communicating, of learning, of being informed, of entering into relationships with others. A way of approaching reality that often favors images over listening and reading has an impact on the way we learn and on the development of a critical sense" (Francis. 2019. Apostolic Exhortation *Christus vivit*, n. 86, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html).

⁶ This generalized suspicion of others may also have its origin in a greater distrust of ourselves, an intimate insecurity that makes us incapable of placing our fragility in the hands of others, but this is a more personal phenomenon that would separate us from our discourse (Pew Research Center, 2007. *Americans and Social Trust: Who, Where and Why*, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2007/02/22/americans-and-social-trust-who-where-and-why/>).

opinion finds neither the time nor the desire to think⁷. Thus, unable to decide what is true, we show apathy towards reality, and we see it as normal that someone lies or spreads false news. Since we do not trust each other's honesty, seeking the truth together through dialogue and respect has become a social utopia.

We can affirm that, in the current polluted communicative context, the *post-truth* era has been followed, logically and coherently, by the *post-trust* era⁸.

2.2. Loss of reputation: incoherence, incompetence, lies

Let us now look at the second cause of the culture of suspicion. According to Mora (2020), "reputation is the shortest way to trust", which is why the loss of reputation of some institutions has become the most important obstacle to trust.

In recent times, a series of large-scale scandals (Lehman Brothers, Panama Papers, Cambridge Analytics, Volkswagen emissions, Petrobras or sexual abuses in the Catholic Church, to name a few) have damaged the reputation of large organizations, generating a growing social malaise towards the elites that run them, and awakened suspicions towards other institutions. It is as if we have suddenly discovered that these organizations serve themselves and not the individuals for whom they were created. The general perception is that the values that guide them - that should shape their identity and inspire their action - are not aligned with those of their publics, who are suspicious of the existence of hidden agendas and devious motivations. As a result, there

⁷ Thomas Aquinas said that knowledge has three phases: perception, reflection and judgment (De Veritate, q. 1, a 9c). Today, Social Networks and other digital platforms have accelerated the first phase, leaving little room for the following two phases.

⁸ Post-truth is made possible by two threats to the public sphere: "The loss of confidence in the institutions that support its [social truth] infrastructure and the profound changes in the way in which knowledge about the world reaches the public". Cf. Urmeneta, M. (2016). "Bienvenidos a la era de la posverdad", Aceprensa <https://www.aceprensa.com/articulos/bienvenidos-la-era-de-la-posverdad/>

is a distrust of experts, of elites who have been elevated by historical criteria or of those hierarchical authorities who have not been able to demonstrate with facts that "power is service", to use an expression of Pope Francis (2013).

Generally, this loss of reputation occurs when one or more of the three ingredients of trustworthiness - integrity, capacity and benevolence - have been neglected⁹. Let's look at them in more detail now:

If Antonello, my neighborhood mechanic, proves himself competent and benevolent, but I discover that he hates cars and mistreats them, he will be betraying his identity and his mission, which is to fix vehicles. Thus, the first enemy of trustworthiness is inconsistency with the values that one professes. When the Church is accused of not helping the most disadvantaged, of wanting to preserve her privileges or of discriminating against some people because of their ideology or orientation, it is suggested that she is betraying her identity.

If Antonello is benevolent and upstanding, but does not know how to fix my car, it will give me the impression that he is incapable at his job, and I will do my best to find another mechanic. Indeed, it is very disappointing to see people or entities full of good will that only manage to do good badly, due to professional incapacity. Therefore, the second enemy of trust is incompetence.

Finally, if my mechanic is competent in his work and upright in his ideas, but charges me more than is fair, I will suspect that he is cheating me for his own benefit. The third and great enemy of trust is deception or lying¹⁰. This almost

⁹ The projection into the future differentiates trust from reputation, two closely related concepts. Reputation is the basis on which the person that is encouraged to trust receives the necessary impulse to make the leap. It could be said that trust arises when we project the reputation of a subject into the future.

¹⁰ John Dean, White House advisor during the Watergate case, clearly pointed out to President Nixon what the real problem was: "The problem is not the crime, but its cover-up", Cfr. "Transcrip of a recording of a meeting among the president, John Dean and H.R. Haldeman in the Oval Office", March 21, 1973. https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/forresearchers/find/tapes/watergate/trial/exhibit_12.pdf

nips trust in the bud. As Nietzsche (1886) famously stated: “I’m not upset that you lied to me, I’m upset that from now on I can’t believe you”.

If an institution is inconsistent, incompetent and a liar, the distrust of the public will be deep, structural and long-lasting. Members or followers of an organization who are repeatedly disappointed will progressively move from disagreement to disenchantment, and from disenchantment to disengagement.

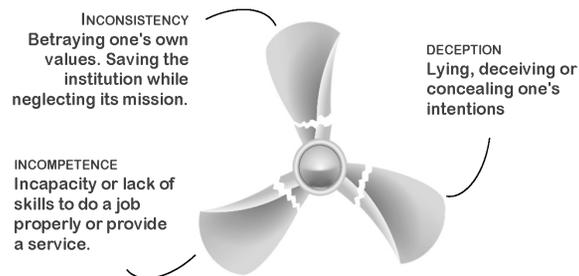


Fig. 2 The three blades of the propeller of untrustworthiness

3. THE COMMUNICATIONS DEPARTMENT, GENERATOR OF SPIRALS OF RELIABILITY

The communications department can contribute with its work to set in motion spirals of trust with small and constant actions maintained over time. Antonello’s smile, his spotty overalls, the price list visible on the wall or the tidiness of his workshop were undoubtedly signs that helped me to leave him my car for the first time.

Those spirals are formed by setting in motion the three blades of the trust propeller: integrity, capability and benevolence, and we communicators can foster those elements in many ways. I suggest a few ideas that, while they could serve many organizations, I apply them here primarily to the Church:

3.1. Communication of Integrity

First, to communicate *integrity*, institutions should engage in frequent exercises of *verbalizing or making explicit the core values*, to ensure that they are kept alive and do not fade with the passage of time. The communications department should continuously rescue these values and disseminate them in the different institutional narratives, putting words and images to what should not be forgotten. Defining these values-frameworks in a public and shared document helps to clearly outline a guide that favors the coherent behavior of the organization, and frees it from opportunistic or random decisions. When the mission and values are alive, moreover, it is easier to serve others, and the institution avoids being locked into an internal narrative and making irrelevant proposals.

But disseminating one’s values in these institutional narratives does not consist of telling fairy tales. One of the most effective exercises for remembering one’s own values is, curiously enough, *that of delivering bad news*, which is my second proposal. Any crisis can serve to bring back to the forefront the indispensable values, those that gave rise to the organization - charity or mercy, in the case of the Church - and whose absence or forgetfulness leads to questioning the institution’s usefulness. To admit that something has been done wrong is to recognize that the values to which one aspires are still the valid guide to which one wishes to return.

Finally, trust is also promoted by sharing with the people involved in a project the objectives, deadlines and means available, which must be consistent with the corporate mission. Knowing where you are going and what you want is the best way to give clear direction and meaning to individual efforts. On the contrary, uncertainty and indecision are sources of doubt and suspicion.

3.2. Communication of Capability

The second blade of our propeller is capability. As communicators, we can reinforce it in many ways. First, by promoting and disseminating *actions that embody the institutional mission*. Values must not only be communicated, but above all they must become a reality in the institution's day-to-day activities. Attention to immigrants, care for the weakest, training for people without resources and many other activities of human promotion that are born out of Christian faith are communicating it with the force of facts. When trust has been lost, actions are the best proof of the ability and intention to make things right again (Carroggio 2020). If words move, example drags and produces enormous dividends of trustworthiness.

Another way to show one's own capacity is to invite "doing", that is, to delegate to committed audiences actions of which they are capable and which the institution has been carrying out up to now. For example, sometimes a press release is much less powerful than the testimony of a volunteer on social networks. This change occurs because digitalization has altered the sources of authority, so that they no longer circulate only vertically, but in a horizontal way via networking. The result has been called "distributed trust" (Botsman 2017). The communication department must therefore share information, encourage collaboration and promote participation and listening.

Finally, it is sometimes necessary *to communicate non-capability or inability*, i.e. to ensure that you do not promise what you cannot deliver. Sometimes, to say "I don't know", "it's not our job" or "we don't have an opinion" is the best way to put the focus on your own ability and to reinforce the reliability of what you do know how to do.

3.3. Communication of Benevolence

The spiral of trustworthiness is completed with the communication of benevolence. In this area, a first proposal would be *to learn to ask for forgiveness*. When faced with a serious error, the request for forgiveness must be extended over time: past, present and future. The mistake made must be acknowledged (*remembering the past*), reparations must be made to those affected (*in the present*) and the causes that led to it must be rectified (*to avoid repeating the same mistakes in the future*). This is the only way to heal a deep wound. Acknowledging a mistake undoubtedly affects reputation, but it introduces into our discourse an element that contains a mysterious and attractive power: humility¹¹. An institution that believes itself to be perfect will demand submission from its members; on the other hand, an organization that recognizes itself as vulnerable will have reason to ask for understanding and to ask for help. What a great sign it is to say: "I need you!" (for example, perhaps the fragility of some priests is an opportunity for us to take better care of them and for many lay people to commit themselves more responsibly to the life of the Church. They need us).

Another way to communicate benevolence is *to hunt down lies and misspoken truths*. It has been said: "If the truth is to cause scandal, it is better to allow scandal than to renounce the truth"¹². These words of Gregory the Great, a Pope of the 6th century show that telling the truth has been, is and always will be a fragile and difficult challenge. The communications department has the particular mission of *exposing the truth*, even when it is uncomfortable and there is a temptation to

¹¹ "Jeff Polzer, an expert in organizational behavior at Harvard, speaks of Vulnerability loop: that is, when one person recognizes his or her own vulnerability, it is easier for the other party to do the same, and trust is born between both parties". Cf. Coyle, D. (2018). *The Culture Code*, Penguin Random House, 104.

¹² The quotation is attributed by Thomas Aquinas to St. Gregory the Great. Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, III q. 42 a. 2 ad 1: "Si tamen de veritate scandalum oritur, magis est sustinendum scandalum quam veritas relinquatur".

disguise it¹³. When necessary, we will be willing to communicate errors, but we can never be accomplices to corporate lies.

My final proposal is that the communications department should promote *upfront transparency*. As we have said, “demanding” that an institution or a person “be transparent” is a sign of distrust¹⁴. However, transparency is a positive value when it is offered on its own initiative, in those areas that allow it and that –if hidden unnecessarily– may generate suspicion, such as economic management, personnel acceptance criteria or internal rules of behavior.

* * *

The loss of trust is often the conclusion of a chain of errors that goes back in time. Re-inspiring it is a process that cannot be postponed until better times come: it is a task that starts today. The motto of these webinars sums up our approach: “Be. Do. Speak. Inspire”. Fidelity to our own identity (*be*) will move our institutions to work at the service of others (*do*); only then will it be worthwhile to communicate (*speak*) and thus inspire the trust we need (*inspire*).

As Pope Francis (2018) said: “Just as crafting peace is an art, so too, learning to trust one another is also an art and a source of happiness”. For me, I can think of no better tool to learn this art than communication.

¹³ In this sense, the communications department can see itself as a “guardian of strategic values”, in Gregory’s expression (cf. Gregory, A. & Willis, P. 2013. *Strategic Public Relations Leadership*. Routledge, 126).

¹⁴ It is this insecurity that currently makes the call for transparency so strong, as we do not trust the intentions of others and expect transparency to ensure that we are in control of a relationship. “Deception is not a minor or a marginal moral failure. Deceivers do not treat others as moral equals; they exempt themselves from obligations that they rely on others to live up to (...). If we want to restore trust we need to reduce deception and lies rather than secrecy”. Cf. O’Neill, O., Op. Cit. Another scholar, Rachel Botsman, thinks also that “secrecy isn’t the enemy of trust; we all need secrets. Deception is the enemy of trust. Being trustworthy and being perceived as trustworthy are two very different things. What really damages trust is when true intentions are obscured: when someone or something pretends to be something it isn’t”. Cf. Botsman, R. (2017). Op. Cit.

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